

Charlie is so cool like: Authenticity, Popularity and Inclusive Masculinity on YouTube

Abstract

On the world's most utilised video-sharing social networking site, YouTube, Charlie McDonnell (*Charlieissocoollike*), Dan Howell (*Danisnotonfire*), and Jack and Finn Harries (*JacksGap*) are Britain's most popular video-bloggers (vloggers). With more than two million regular subscribers to each of their channels, along with millions of casual viewers, they represent a new form of authentic online celebrity. These young men, whose YouTube careers began as teenagers, do not espouse a traditional form of masculinity; they are not sporty, macho, or even expressly concerned with being perceived as heterosexual. Instead, they present a softer masculinity, eschewing the homophobia, misogyny, and aggression attributed to boys of previous generations. These behaviours are theorised using Anderson's Inclusive Masculinity Theory. Drawing on analysis of 115 video-blogs (vlogs), along with an in-depth interview with Charlie McDonnell, this article examines how these young men developed and exhibit their inclusive masculinities and attitudes, which we postulate are a reflection of dominant youth culture.

Keywords: authenticity, celebrity, inclusive masculinity, popularity, vlogging, YouTube

Introduction

Research on heterosexual male youth has traditionally found that an anti-gay, anti-feminine model of masculinity has maintained dominance in youth cultures (Connell, 1995; Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Pollack, 1999). Influenced by a broader culture which valorised this model, boys established themselves as both masculine and heterosexual through enacting aggressive, macho, and stoic behaviours. Engaging with these masculine traits raised boys' popularity, stratifying them according to a narrow set of gendered expectations (Plummer, 1999). Given the cultural conflation of male femininity with homosexuality, homophobia was also central to the social construction of masculinities (Kimmel 1994). Thus, subordinated groups included those who were perceived to be weak, feminine, and/or gay.

However, as part of a broader social trend of decreasing homophobia (Clements and Field 2014; Weeks 2007), recent research has documented a significant decline in homophobic attitudes among heterosexual male youth, and a concurrent transformation in young men's gendered behaviours (Adams, 2011; Anderson, 2014; McCormack, 2012a). This attitudinal and behavioural shift also mirrors the forms of masculinity that predominate on the internet, one of young men's most important social landscapes (Zywica and Danowski, 2008). Yet few researchers have empirically investigated heterosexual masculinities on social networking sites (Light, 2013).

In this study, we examine how masculinity is exhibited among the leading celebrities on the video-sharing social networking site YouTube. We do this through video analysis of Britain's four most successful male video-bloggers (vloggers): Charlie McDonnell (*Charlieissocoollike*), Dan Howell (*Danisnotonfire*), and Jack and Finn Harries (*JacksGap*). We examine these young men's video-blogs (vlogs) for displays of gendered behaviour, their attitudes toward homosexuality, and other significant markers of inclusive or orthodox

masculinity (Anderson, 2009). Our analysis is supplemented with an in-depth, in-person interview with Charlie McDonnell, the UK's most popular YouTube user.

We find that these young men represent themselves as non-aggressive, emotionally open, and embracing of their femininity; they publicly display homosocial tactility with other men, support their gay friends, and promote a more egalitarian perspective on the status of women. These findings support and expand upon Anderson's (2009) *inclusive masculinity theory* by showing how inclusive masculinities are a central component of popularity for male youth on YouTube.

Inclusive Masculinity Theory

To understand how the attitudes and behaviours of young male video-bloggers have developed, it is necessary to provide a sociological account of youth masculinities in Anglo-American cultures. Inclusive Masculinity Theory (IMT) posits *homohysteria* as central to the regulation and stratification of masculinities (Anderson, 2009). This concept emerged to understand the social dynamics where homophobia regulates men's gendered behaviours (Kimmel, 1994; McCreary, 1994) and where it does not (Adams, 2011; McCormack, 2012a; Roberts, 2013). Cultures in which homophobia is an effective way of regulating masculinity are defined as 'homohysterical'. McCormack and Anderson (2014) describe a homohysterical culture as being characterised by: 1) widespread awareness that homosexuality exists as a static sexual orientation within a significant portion of the population; 2) widespread and strong attitudinal homophobia; and 3) the conflation of male femininity with homosexuality.

In such a culture, homohysteria describes the fear faced by heterosexuals of being thought gay through the violation of cultural gender norms. Thus, in periods of homohysteria, men and boys will use homophobia alongside exaggerated masculinity to distance themselves from homosexual suspicion and secure their position in a hierarchical masculine stratification

(Connell, 1995; Floyd, 2000). Anderson (2014) argues that from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s, Western countries exhibited high homophobia, particularly in regard to a socio-political conservative fervor, and the widespread fears and anxieties surrounding HIV/AIDS (see also Clements and Field, 2014).

However, IMT also contends that as homophobia declines, men's attitudes toward homosexuality not only improve, but heterosexual men will also more freely associate with behaviours once culturally coded as feminine. Thus, while homophobia and anti-femininity have traditionally proven to be effective policing mechanisms of masculinity in periods of high homophobia, they no longer maintain the same currency in regulating many groups of male youth in a culture of decreased or eliminated homophobia. In other words, a variety of once-stigmatised gendered behaviours proliferate when there is an absence of homophobic policing (Anderson, 2009).

It has also been argued that the increased cultural visibility and acceptance of homosexuality can be incorporated by dominant forms of masculinity in ways that do not fundamentally improve the experiences of sexual minorities. Demetriou (2001) contended that marginal masculinities—including gay masculinities—can become appropriated into a 'hybrid hegemonic bloc', a process which he claimed sustained patriarchy by making men's dominance over women less visible. However, declining homophobia has been shown to produce significant positive changes for sexual minority youth (McCormack, 2012a; Savin-Williams, 2005), particularly concerning the intra-masculine stratification of men (i.e. how men and boys police or promote the gender behaviours of each other), or what Demetriou (2001: 354) called 'internal hegemony'.

The decrement of homophobia creates a culture of increased inclusivity, which has tangible effects on gendered interactions and language (McCormack, 2011a). McCormack and Anderson (2014) use the term inclusivity not to imply full equality of all minority groups,

but instead increased access to the power that was once confined to heterosexuals through homophobia. This inclusion has social benefits for both gay and straight men (McCormack, 2012a). In the absence of homophobia, men are permitted to engage in an increased range of gendered behaviours, without threat to their publicly perceived heterosexual identities, and multiple masculinities can exist without hierarchy or hegemony (Adams, 2011; McCormack, 2011a). In such a culture, the gendered behaviours of boys and men will be less differentiated from those of girls and women (McCormack and Anderson, 2014; Worthen, 2014).

Recent empirical research on Anglo-American male youth provides strong evidence in support of IMT, with inclusive masculinities documented in a range of locations, including those with traditionally high levels of homophobia and masculine hierarchy. Considerable research has applied IMT to specific settings in the United Kingdom: McCormack (2011a) has demonstrated that in an English sixth form young heterosexual men expressed physical tactility with each other, while homophobia (including homophobic discourse) was heavily stigmatised and policed by students; Roberts (2013) has showed that young working class men based in the retail sector adopted a softer model of masculinity, while rejecting traditional gender roles; Jarvis (2013) has found that heterosexual men freely associated with sexual minorities, playing on gay rugby teams in the South of England (see also Anderson and McGuire, 2010).

In the United States, Michael (2013) has demonstrated that openly gay athletes are increasingly accepted by their heterosexual teammates; Baker and Hotek (2011) have showed that heterosexual high school wrestlers provided emotional support for teammates in caring ways; Luttrell (2012) has found that ethnic minority boys esteemed love, care and solidarity in their friendships. It has also been found that heterosexual men in Britain (Anderson, Adams and Rivers, 2012), Australia (Drummond, Filiault, Anderson and Jeffries, 2014) and

the United States (Anderson, 2014) frequently kiss one another as expressions of homosocial endearment.

Concerning the use of language, McCormack (2011b) has theorised how the intent and effect of homosexually-themed discourse changes in a context of declining homophobia. In contrast to the prevalent use of homophobic language among heterosexual male youth in periods of high homophobia, he argues that in a culture of diminished homophobia, *gay discourse* is used without intent (either positive or negative), and which may privilege heterosexuality; whereas in a gay-friendly culture, *pro-gay language* is used by male youth with positive intent and positive social effects. Here, phrases such as ‘that’s so gay’ can bond gay and straight youth together, even though in different social contexts it will have different effects.

Inclusive Masculinities of Generation *i*

In understanding the generational influences on sexualities, Plummer (2010) argues that the unique social and historical context of each generation effects how sexualities are experienced within society. While his focus was on sexual minorities, similar generational cohorts also exist for heterosexuals. In a recent book, Anderson (2014) conceptualised these behavioural and attitudinal changes on a macro-level through an explication of generational tropes. He uses the term ‘Generation *i*’ to describe those born after 1990 (sometimes referred to as ‘millennials’) and distinguish contemporary male youth from those of earlier generations, such as Generation X (approximately those born from 1960 to 1980), and Generation Y, (approximately those born from 1980-1990). Although these terms remain loose cultural signifiers, Generation *i* is a heuristic term for categorising how contemporary male youth differ from previous generations of men (Anderson, 2014).

The men and boys of Generation *i* are characterised by 1) their inclusive masculinities and attitudes, which find homophobia, not homosexuality, to be unacceptable; 2) their use of computers, smartphones and other technologies to display affection for each other digitally, by sharing photos, videos and emotional care work on social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube; 3) their use of these technologies to consume large amounts of pornography, which simultaneously influences them toward liberal perspectives on sexual diversity (McNair, 2013; Wright and Randall, 2013), and sometimes even permits them to masturbate alongside a friend without homosexual suspicion (Anderson, 2014; see also Savin-Williams and Vrangalova, 2013).

We argue that while educational and sporting settings were once the terrains on which young men battled for popularity in a hierarchical structure of masculine dominance, the youth of Generation *i* also organise their lives around the digital spaces available to them on social media (Anderson, 2014). Whereas it used to be that the ‘coolest’ boys were those who physically intimidated their peers, engaging in what Mac an Ghail (1994: 56) termed ‘the three F’s – fighting, fucking and football’, this model of popularity has not endured among the middle class youth of Generation *i*. However, while class intersects with the construction of masculine hierarchy and popularity, both McComack (2014) and Roberts (2013) have also documented inclusive masculinities among working class British male youth.

The internet has been considered instrumental by scholars examining both how inclusive masculinities have developed among heterosexual male youth and the restructuring of what it means to be popular in youth cultures (see Harper, Bruce, Serrano and Jamil, 2009; Wright and Randall, 2013). This is also true among communities traditionally thought to promote hegemonic masculinity. For example, in his analysis of 48 association football message boards in the UK, Cleland (2013: 1) found that the majority of posters displayed ‘inclusivity through the rejection of posts that they feel have pernicious homophobic intent’.

However, other researchers have drawn attention to the continued use of racist, sexist and homophobic scripts on social media platforms (Dubrofsky and Wood, 2014; Rivers and Duncan, 2013), sometimes framed as emblematic of ‘laddish culture’ (Jackson 2002), alongside contested claims that representations of women in pornography promote misogynistic attitudes and behaviours (cf. McNair, 2013). Thus, while social attitudes have shifted, it is important to acknowledge that the internet can be utilised in divergent ways. In this study, we focus our attention on the display of youth masculinities on YouTube.

Authenticity, Popularity, and YouTube

McCormack’s (2011a) ethnographic research with sixth form boys demonstrated how, in a culture of diminished homophobia, young men’s popularity can be delineated without hegemony. This contrasts with earlier research (Epstein, 1998; Mac an Ghaill, 1994), which found that social status was maintained through avoiding behaviours coded as feminine, including participation in academic work (Jackson, 2002) and nonparticipation in sports (Wellard, 2010). Instead of being ranked by adherence to orthodox masculine scripts, McCormack argues that popularity is stratified according to the display of key character traits: 1) charisma; 2) providing emotional support; 3) social fluidity; and, as we focus on in this article, 4) authenticity.

While authenticity could be seen as consolidating orthodox forms of masculinity that embody problematic notions of muscularity or breadwinning (Mac an Ghaill, 1994; McDowell, 2003), McCormack highlights how for his participants, authenticity is principally about being open and expressive of one’s individuality. This intersects with other inclusive characteristics to promote boys’ popularity in school settings. Thus, rather than drawing on a heteronormative model of ‘authentic masculinity’ (Payne 2007), McCormack (2011a: 93)

defines authenticity as ‘the presentation of a “truthful” and “honest” self’, which, alongside emotional openness and support for sexual minority peers, ‘is a valued attribute for boys’.

Supporting McCormack’s typology of adolescent popularity in a context of declining homophobia, research shows that a performer’s *authenticity* appears to be a key determinant of esteem among young online audiences. Concerning the role of celebrity, Allen and Mendick (2013) find that authenticity is defined according to a performer’s perceived level of talent and effort, or sincerity, which influences their popularity among young audiences. Conversely, their participants viewed ‘improper’ celebrity as that defined by inauthenticity. Treated more critically, these authors also note how authenticity can operate as a form of class distinction, with middle class youth more likely to position themselves against reality television celebrities than working class youth (see also Dubrofsky and Wood, 2014; Skeggs, 2009).

Although the concept of popularity has received most academic attention in educational settings, male youth today find that their popularity can be altered through engagement with social media (Zywica and Danowski, 2008). On YouTube, for example, peers can leave messages beneath a user’s video as they wish about another’s gender expression or sexuality, perhaps even more freely than in a ‘real’ setting (Rivers and Duncan, 2013). While audiences can comment on, share, favourite or like videos to promote them (Burgess and Green, 2009), the Internet also provides anonymity in these interactions, allowing for not only the exploration of online fantasy, identity-creation and sexual exploration (Mowlabocus, 2012; Waskul, 2003), but also opportunities to demean others and regulate expressions of gender and sexuality (Patchin and Hinduja, 2006; Rivers, 2013).

Video-blogging came to widespread prominence on YouTube. After Google and Facebook, YouTube is now the third most visited website in the world. Writing before Google’s 2006 acquisition of YouTube, Parker and Pfeiffer (2005: 4-5) suggested that ‘video

blogging combines the ubiquitous, grassroots, Web-based journaling of blogging with the richness of expression available in multimedia...combining soapboxing, distributed discussion, and the social cohesion of blogging with the vibrant, immediate honesty of video'. Video-blog entries are uploaded to YouTube 'channels' (individual personalised web-pages) regularly, providing a forum for individuals to talk about their lives, express their emotions and opinions, and interact with other users.

In a quantitative analysis of YouTube's 'most popular' content, Burgess and Green (2009: 53) found that their sample was dominated by user-generated videos. Among these, 40% were in the form of video-blogs, which they describe as 'an emblematic form of YouTube participation'. In this article we use three terms to describe this form of YouTube participation: video-blog is shortened to *vlog*, video-blogging is shortened to *vlogging*, and video-blogger is shortened to *vlogger*.

Tolson (2010) argues that YouTube, and the phenomenon of vlogging in particular, offers young people a more authentic medium through which to achieve celebrity status. He notes that traditional broadcast media, or 'old media' (radio and television), struggles to overcome its association with inauthenticity because of its institutional location, from a newsroom or studio, with presenters who speak in standardised English; yet many of the conventions of old media are absent from vlogs, allowing ordinary people to speak directly to their audiences, from their own bedrooms and in their own voice. One recent example is the British Olympic diver Tom Daley, 19 at the time of posting, coming out through a vlog. This illustrates how YouTube can be utilised to avoid traditional media narratives.

YouTube's audience continues to grow rapidly across all demographic groups, with an overwhelming majority (89%) of young internet users (aged 18-29) in America using online video sharing sites (Madden, 2009). With increasing audience sizes, some YouTube vloggers now rival prime-time television shows. This has enabled some vloggers (including

those in this study) to achieve a celebrity status, which has also led to greater engagement with other forms of media, blurring the boundaries between ‘old’ and ‘new’ media (BBC, 2013).

Given these trends, it appears that authenticity not only influences young people’s popularity offline (McCormack 2001a), but it can also influence their judgements of YouTube vloggers and celebrities online (Allen and Mendick, 2013; Tolson, 2001, 2010). In this qualitative study, by focusing on Britain’s most successful male vloggers, we suggest that it is the display of authenticity (McCormack, 2011a) and inclusive masculinity (Anderson, 2009) which has made these young men so popular on YouTube.

Methods

This study focuses on Britain’s four most popular male vloggers: Charlie McDonnell (*Charlieissocoollike*), Dan Howell (*Danisnotonfire*), and Jack and Finn Harries (*JacksGap*)¹. Popularity was determined according to the number of subscribers these young men’s YouTube channels had at the time of data collection (June 2013 – September 2013). We use two forms of data collection: 1) interpretive video analysis; 2) an in-depth interview, in order to investigate the masculinities of Britain’s most popular YouTube celebrities.

The Vloggers

Charlie McDonnell, 23,² started making videos aged 16. He is emotionally expressive and self-defines as effeminate. On YouTube he is known as ‘*Charlieissocoollike*’. His channel has over 2 million subscribers, while his vlogs get many more millions of casual viewers, and his most watched video has over 9 million views—making him the most watched vlogger in the United Kingdom.

Dan Howell, 22, started making videos aged 14. He is a charismatic performer, drawing on his social awkwardness to make jokes and social commentaries. Known on YouTube as '*Danisnotonfire*', his channel now has over 2.5 million subscribers. Most of Dan's vlogs take place in his bedroom, where he is surrounded by stuffed animals and brightly coloured objects. Of these vloggers, Dan has achieved the most traditional/old media success, having secured a weekly show on BBC Radio 1 with his friend and fellow vlogger Phil Lester (*AmazingPhil*).

Jack Harries, 19, began his YouTube channel, '*JacksGap*', as a way to document his gap year between secondary school and university. However, the channel is now run as a joint venture with his identical twin, Finn. Over the period of data collection, their channel overtook both Dan and Charlie's, securing over 2.8 million subscribers. Unlike Charlie and Dan, Jack and Finn have engaged with traditional/old media before YouTube, appearing in (BBC and ITV) low-budget comedy television shows as teenagers.

Procedures

Given that by the time of research completion these vloggers had uploaded a combined 318 videos to their main YouTube channels, we determined to analyse a strategic sample: All videos uploaded between September 2012 and September 2013. However, because Charlie, Dan and Jack have created videos for a much longer period of time, we also examined each of their 20 most watched videos (unless already included) in this sample to examine for both the content of their most popular videos and the longevity of their gendered behaviours (the earliest video included is from May 2009). This sampling was facilitated by YouTube's search options, which enable one to scroll through a user's videos according to either 'Date added (newest – oldest)' or 'Most popular'. In total, we analysed 115 videos: 40 by Charlie, 40 by Dan, 33 by Jack and Finn, along with 2 'collaboration' vlogs on other

YouTube channels selected for inclusion because they were directly promoted by and featured these vloggers. This amounted to over 600 minutes of video footage.

The video analysis process involved taking detailed notes about key indicators of inclusive or orthodox masculinity along the following dimensions: 1) association with homosexuality, 2) association with femininity, and 3) displays of inclusive masculinity.

Emerging themes were coded inductively, using the authors' background knowledge of existing gender and masculinities literature—an approach that mirrors the freedom of interpretation found in ethnographic fieldwork (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw, 2011). While aspects of these young men's behaviours may have been omitted, given the large number of videos surveyed, the strength of our analysis is improved by having two researchers examine each video for inter-rater reliability. Both authors compared notes to improve the reliability of findings until agreement was reached. Finally, because descriptions of gendered behaviour are no substitute for observation, we encourage readers to watch the videos mentioned in this article for themselves.

To further enhance our understanding of how popular male vloggers represent their masculinity on YouTube, we conducted an in-depth interview with Charlie McDonnell. This face-to-face interview allowed us not only to confirm whether the attitudes and behaviours observed in Charlie's vlogs are sincere, but also to investigate how his inclusive attitudes and behaviours developed on- and off-line. The interview was recorded, transcribed and coded for themes relating to Charlie's school experiences, his experiences using YouTube, along with his attitudes concerning gender and sexuality. Coding was initially undertaken by the first author and cross-checked by the second (Goetz and LeCompte, 1984).

Association with Homosexuality

Contrary to what traditional research on masculinity has suggested (Epstein, 1998; Kimmel, 1994; Mac an Ghaill, 1994), these young, heterosexual, male vloggers freely and frequently associate with gay men. This includes interacting with gay vloggers, who often feature prominently in their videos. For example, the signature ending to all of Charlie's vlogs includes a cutaway screen which reads, 'Thanks for watching!' along with a voiceover from iconic gay British performer, Stephen Fry, saying, 'You've just had the almost imponderable joy of watching Charlie is so cool like, which makes you, like, cool'.

In a collaboration vlog, 'British Slang | JacksGap + Tyler Oakley' (21 September 2012), Jack and Finn appear with the gay American vlogger Tyler Oakley (*TylerOakley*) to teach him several British slang words. The first term they teach Tyler is 'dog's bollocks' (meaning something is good). Finn turns to Tyler and says, 'you're the dog's bollocks'. When discussing the word 'cheeky', Jack suggests that Tyler uses this term with his audience, to which Tyler responds, 'I'm gonna bring it. I'm bringing it to the gay community'.

In another video uploaded to Tyler's channel ('Twin Twinks Learn Gay Slang', 21 September 2012), Tyler introduces Jack and Finn to his largely gay male audience by saying, 'So since these boys are unfortunately straight, I thought I would teach them some of our culture, and see if they know what's what in the gay community'. The twins respond by saying, 'This should be interesting. It will be fun'. Here, Tyler describes the twins as 'twinks', a term used to denote young, slender, hairless adolescent males, clarifying for them, 'if you were gay, you would be twink'. Comfortable with this label, Jack and Finn engage playfully with Tyler's description of them. These vlogs thus offer a clear example of being comfortable spending time with and appearing in videos with a young gay man, for a largely gay male audience.

Another way in which these vloggers associate with homosexuality is through what McCormack (2012a) describes as *ironic heterosexual recuperation*, whereby men ironically embrace ‘gayness’ to consolidate their heterosexual identities, rather than resorting to homophobia. For example, in multiple videos, these vloggers glorify the members of the boy-band One Direction—who are known for their pro-gay disposition. In ‘TRUTH OR DARE 5’ (13 August 2013), Dan responds to the question, ‘If you had to, which celebrity would you make out with?’ by saying, ‘You know I’m going to go with Zayn [One Direction member]. He’s probably the most attractive human currently alive on the planet. So I mean, regardless of sexuality, if someone says they wouldn’t bang him, they’re probably lying’. Similarly, in ‘Dan and Phil vs. Tumblr’ (11 July 2013), Dan shows a photograph of himself meeting another One Direction member in person, saying ‘I’m not going to lie guys, there was a lot of erotic eye contact’. In Jack and Finn’s collaboration vlog with Tyler, when the conversation turns to One Direction, Jack says, ‘You see, I’ve got a bit of a thing on Twitter for Zayn Malik. Me and Zayn’. On screen, Twitter messages Jack has sent to the band member appear, including, ‘Zayn baby you’ll always be my favourite. Don’t forget that x’. Even Finn, who at first claims to have no knowledge of the band members, ends the conversation by saying, ‘Harry Styles. I like Harry Styles. He can be my baby’.

It appears that these inclusive behaviours are not used to intentionally demonstrate the vloggers’ progressive attitudes, or even (as some may perceive them) to mock homosexuality. Rather, they are artefacts of the inclusivity that these young men were socialised into within their peer settings. This was illustrated by our interview with Charlie, who attended a standard state secondary school with approximately one thousand pupils. Highly supportive of his gay male peers, Charlie recalls that, aged 11, he responded to some boys discussing whether being gay was right or wrong by publicly showing his affection toward another male: ‘I was saying to them that being gay isn’t a problem, so I just kissed him on the cheek’.

Reflecting on the kiss, he said, ‘I wasn’t expressing my sexuality, I was doing it because I didn’t think there was anything wrong with people who are gay. So I was just expressing that’. Charlie even talked about this kiss on YouTube, noting that he did not want to manipulate the truth of the encounter: ‘It wasn’t a case of changing the story so that people would think that I was straight. I was just telling the story as it was’ (see also McCormack 2012b for positive inclusion of sexual minority peers).

Charlie experienced no bullying at his school due to his perceived sexuality or support for gay equality. Although he did not have any openly gay friends at school, asked whether there was any homophobia amongst his peers, he said, ‘I don’t think so. There were a few gay people, but they were never really harassed or anything’. Thus, the school environment Charlie described conforms to the inclusive school cultures found in other recent research (McCormack, 2012a, 2014), where being gay is not seen to be a significant factor for students’ inclusion of their peers.

Association with Femininity

Whether dressing up in women’s clothes and jewellery, showing off grooming products, or comparing themselves to women, in stark contrast to the requisites of orthodox masculinity, the masculinities displayed by these vloggers frequently include behaviours traditionally coded as feminine (see McCormack and Anderson, 2014). At school, Charlie was comfortable being identified with a ‘softer’ masculinity, saying, ‘I definitely think there were people who were more feminine that I associated myself with’. This character trait was exemplified in Charlie’s early vlogs, and asked whether he is proud of his femininity he said, ‘It’s just who I am’. He received strong social support from his peers in promoting his YouTube videos, who simply encouraged him to be himself.

Perhaps the most striking example of comfort with being seen as feminine comes from Dan, who dresses up as female characters in 16 out of 40 of the vlogs we reviewed from his channel. Dan jokes about his feminine appearance (or gender ambiguity) in several vlogs, including ‘PERSONAL SPACE’ (6 September 2012), where he plays a female character who asks Dan (playing himself) to respect her ‘personal bubble’, before saying to her friend on a mobile, ‘Oh My God Becky, I just saw the tallest lesbian ever’ (this joke was so popular among Dan’s subscribers that if you type ‘tall lesbian’ into Google Images, the top three results show photographs of Dan). Although Dan’s amateur drag performances could be interpreted as aping femininity, rather than embracing it, his repeated use of this light-hearted motif indicates that his gender nonconforming behaviour is not being strictly policed by homophobia. Illustrating this, in a video uploaded to Phil Lester’s channel (*AmazingPhil*), ‘A Day in the Life of Phil and Dan!’ (17 March 2012), while looking at a sequined dress in a shop window, Dan says, ‘Look how cool it is. Sometimes I wish I was a girl’.

In a series of videos titled ‘Twin Mail’ (1, 2, 3, and 4, respectively), Jack and Finn open letters and parcels sent to them by their fans from around the world. These parcels often include gifts, such as sweets, toys or jewellery. In ‘Twin Mail 2’ (4 June 2012), Jack puts a bracelet on Finn, saying, ‘that’s pretty, you can have that’. In ‘Twin Mail 3’ (16 September 2012) the boys wear fluffy animal-themed headbands and Finn puts lip gloss on Jack, who pouts his lips for the camera. And in ‘Twin Mail 4’ (22 April 2013), Jack wears a tiara, while Finn puts fake eyelashes on him. Finn says, ‘There you go, you are beautiful. You are a beautiful woman’.

There was also evidence in our interview with Charlie that his attitudes towards women are more feminist-oriented than previous models of masculinity have prescribed. For example, in one of his music videos (‘Here Comes My Baby’, 14 June 2010), Charlie performs (along with an openly bisexual vlogger) alongside several young women. Asked

whether these adolescent women were selected because of their attractiveness, he said, ‘No, they were just available. I didn’t go on a search to find the hottest hotties to go around in bikinis’. Charlie made it clear that his selection was not motivated by sexual objectification, saying, ‘It was girls that we knew who could act well. It was more important to me that they could act... I needed a script/plot in the video in order to keep people engaged, so acting skills were more important than looks’.

Charlie’s association with femininity does sometimes lead to people asking if he is gay. However, discussing how his audience responds to his inclusive, softer masculinity, he suggested that being seen as feminine or gay was not a problem with them. For example, he said, ‘in a question and answer video people have asked if I’m gay, and I’ve just said “no I’m not”. I just tell people I’m straight and that’s about it really’. When asked how often he expresses his heterosexuality in vlogs, he said, ‘I don’t think it’s necessary for me to do that, unless it’s something specific to what I’m talking about. Like, why don’t I have a girlfriend? I just respond by saying that’s a personal choice’. He added, ‘I don’t start every video by saying: “Hi, I’m British, I know I’m quite effeminate, that’s fine. Just to let you know, I am straight. Now we can get on with the video?”’

Displays of Inclusive Masculinity

Inclusive masculinity can be gauged by men’s ability to engage in tactile homosocial interactions, without fear of being homosexualised (Anderson, 2014; Anderson and McCormack, 2014; McCormack, 2012a). Thus, these vloggers’ inclusive masculinities are exemplified by their interactions with other men. For example, in ‘My University Room’ (2 December 2012), Jack gives his audience a tour around his new bedroom at university, which is decorated with photographs of him with male friends, including fellow vlogger Marcus Butler (*MarcusButlerTV*). In one photograph Jack and Marcus (both heterosexual) are

huddled together, their arms over each other's shoulders. In another, Jack is sat in Marcus's lap, touching his face affectionately, their arms wrapped around one another in a tight embrace.

Homosocial tactility is also evident in collaboration vlogs, where these vloggers interact with each other. This includes both of Jack and Finn's vlogs with Tyler Oakley, in which they sit shoulder-to-shoulder, arms touching continuously throughout. Another example comes from 'How To Speak INTERNET' (19 October 2012), in which Dan meets with Jack and Finn to ask the twins about their knowledge of 'internet language'. At one point, Jack puts his arm around Dan to ask, 'What's your OTP?' (One True Pairing – a term used by fans to describe two celebrities they wish to see in a romantic relationship together). Laughing, Dan turns to Jack and says, 'Call me', then a moment later says, 'You're so hot Jack'. This is also another example of ironic heterosexual recuperation (McCormack, 2012a).

Alongside homosocial tactility and also illustrative of their inclusive masculinities, examples of both gay discourse and pro-gay language (McCormack, 2011b) can be seen in many of these vloggers' interactions. For example, in 'Honey and Feathers' (15 March 2013), Charlie allows himself to be slathered with honey and feathers by friends to raise money for charity. Here, Dan contributes to the stunt by putting honey on Charlie's half-naked body, where he says, 'I'm trying to be gentle'. Later, the comedian Tim Minchin arrives to get 'revenge' on Charlie by pouring honey over his head, saying, 'Ooh, it's so erotic'. He goes on to cover Charlie's underwear with honey, saying 'I'm painting your penis now'. Next, they throw colourful feathers over Charlie, when Tim says, 'I'll do the penis again'. Charlie is not perturbed by Tim or Dan's comments, laughing along to their (homo)sexualised jokes.

Further examples of gay discourse come through these vloggers' interactions with user-created content made by their audiences. For example, in 'Dan and Phil vs. Tumblr' (11 July 2013), Dan looks at text and images created by some of his 'biggest fans' on the website

Tumblr, including ‘fan-fiction’ (creative writing about Dan) and ‘fan-art’ (drawings and photoshopped images of Dan). Some of this content includes erotic writing and images, which often has a gay theme. Dan ends the vlog by celebrating the creators of this fan-fiction, before reading out a piece of homoerotic fan-fiction written about him and Phil (*AmazingPhil*). Although gay discourse can be used as a way of consolidating a heterosexual identity, McCormack (2011b) highlights that it often has socio-positive effects, such as allowing straight men to strengthen bonds with gay men. For example, in his vlog with Tyler, Jack closes the video by clicking his fingers from side to side in a sassy manner, saying, ‘See you later girlfriend’.

Being open about their vulnerability was another way in which these vloggers expressed behaviours traditionally stigmatised among men (Goodey, 1997). This is evidenced by the manner in which they describe themselves in their vlogs. For example, in ‘ENVY’ (2 November 2012), Dan describes himself by saying, ‘I’m a pretty nice guy. I’m about as violent and intimidating as a pink butterfly that’s got stuck on a marshmallow’. Jack is emotionally expressive in vlogs such as ‘My Memory Box’ (25 December 2012), in which he looks at sentimental objects from his past, including a poem he wrote as a child, while in ‘Why Women Scare Me’ (6 May 2009), Charlie introduces himself with:

My name is Charlie, I’m 18-years-old. I am a boy, and I am afraid of lots of things:

I’m afraid of commitments, I’m afraid of multitasking, I’m afraid of my little pony,

I’m afraid of moths, but most importantly I am afraid, no, I am petrified of women.

In one of his most popular videos (‘Duet with Myself’, 30 November 2009), Charlie uses a split screen video technique to sing a duet with himself. The duet is a self-deprecating song about embracing oneself in spite of one’s faults. Charlie sings, ‘I am you, you are me / Together we make an unfit, spotty, neurotic, unfunny, forgetful, weedy, Charlie / And when I’m feeling down / We know that we will only ever have each other around’. This video is

typical of Charlie's emotionally open persona and willingness to expose his vulnerabilities (see for example 'I'm Scared', 9 November 2012 or 'A Song about Someone', 3 April 2013).

Discussion

Youth masculinities in Anglo-American cultures have undergone a radical transition in recent years (Anderson, 2009; McCormack, 2012; Roberts, 2013). This has been bolstered by the influence of internet technologies and social media (Anderson, 2012; McNair, 2013). On YouTube, this change has manifested itself through the rise of highly popular young male vloggers such as Charlie McDonnell, Dan Howell, and Jack and Finn Harries. In the absence of homophobia, these young men evidently do not fear being thought of as gay or feminine by their peers. Instead, they are exemplars of the softer, gay-friendly, feminist-oriented masculinities which have emerged in a culture of inclusive masculinity (Anderson, 2009). Whether it is through their emotional openness, inclusion of sexual minorities, enacting feminised behaviours, or willingness to engage in homosocial interactions with other men, these young men's masculinities are far removed from the masculine orthodoxy of previous generations.

As members of Generation *i*, these young men have used their intimate knowledge of social media to enhance their popularity online. Yet their success on YouTube also relates to how popularity is stratified among contemporary male adolescents; multiple other British research projects show that male youth are no longer stratified according to an aggressive and domineering form of masculine dominance (Anderson, 2014; Cleland, 2013; Jarvis, 2013; McCormack, 2011a; Roberts, 2013). From our data, it appears that heterosexual masculinities are comfortably consistent with the display of physical and emotional intimacy toward other males, regardless of whether they are gay, bisexual or heterosexual.

Thus, while Pollack (1999) showed that a code once existed to severely restrict the emotional freedom of boys, and Goodey (1997) highlighted that displays of feminised emotions are problematic for males because they contested dominant notions of orthodox masculinity, the emotional openness of the vloggers in this study highlights that viewing boys as emotionally illiterate is based on work that is now outdated. Further highlighting the significance of social context to understanding masculinities, this is supplemented by Way's (2011) research with ethnic minority male youth, which found younger boys embraced emotional intimacy, while older boys eschewed it.

Even with audience sizes that compete with prime-time television, and increasing engagement with traditional media and celebrities (see for example BBC, 2013), these vloggers have maintained their inclusivity and individuality. Thus, we suggest that the young men researched for this article can be defined as a new form of authentic online celebrity.

Just as McCormack (2011a) found that boys' popularity was enhanced by their display of authentic behaviours, such as wearing individualistic clothing or engaging in nonconforming social activities, these vloggers express themselves openly and honestly. Given the similarities between the behaviours of these vloggers and the behaviours documented among adolescent males in other settings (Anderson, 2014; Baker and Hotek 2011; McCormack, 2012a), it is likely that the inclusive masculinities exhibited by Charlie, Dan, Jack and Finn are judged by their young audiences to be sincere. As Charlie put it, 'It's just the norm. It's how all my friends are'.

Furthermore, it is likely that their authentic behaviours are both enabled by the social media platform of YouTube (Tolson, 2010) and a major factor in establishing and maintaining their celebrity status among a young audience (Allen and Mendick, 2013). Given that the existing masculinities literature has tended to examine the intra-masculine stratification of males (Demetriou, 2001), it is noteworthy that Charlie suggests his

association with homosexuality and femininity does not reduce, but instead enhances his popularity among female audience members, suggesting that inclusive masculinities (on YouTube at least) are also supported by young women. However, the support of female fans may also indicate that these popular masculinities are promoted as a result of the sexual and social desirability of these vloggers along heteronormative lines. Further research is warranted to empirically test both the extent to which audiences are responsive to the inclusive masculinities now prevalent on YouTube and whether young women promote inclusive masculinities more broadly, and in offline spaces, to the same extent that young men do (see McCormack and Anderson, 2014).

It is important to recognise the limitations to this study, which focuses on the online representations of the four most popular British men on YouTube, as it is possible that Charlie's descriptions of his inclusive attitudes and school culture may elide elements of marginalisation that existed. However, the emphatic nature of his responses, the logical consistency of his arguments, and how his attitudes and behaviours maintained consistency provide *prima facie* evidence of a change to youth culture over time.

Although some of the behaviours described in our results, including these vloggers' uses of gay discourse and female clothing, could be interpreted as privileging heterosexuality, rather than celebrating homosexuality and femininity, we suggest the combination of pro-gay attitudes, pro-gay language, and interactions with gay and bisexual vloggers/friends demonstrated by Charlie, Dan, Jack and Finn strongly supports our argument that youth masculinities have become more inclusive. Similarly, while homosocial interactions have historically been shown to promote hierarchical masculine stratifications (Bird, 1996), these vloggers' interactions with once subordinated masculinities (particularly gay men) demonstrates a significant expansion of men's gender behaviours. Given their high popularity and authentic online celebrity status, it is likely that not only have these vloggers benefitted

from the youth culture that they belong to, but are simultaneously contributing to it by promoting their inclusive masculinities to millions of young viewers.

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¹ The names of all YouTube channels are italicised (e.g. *Charlieissocoollike*).

² The ages of all vloggers given are at the time of data collection.